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ABSTRACT

A multi-age summer adventure camp at the University of Idaho offers 4 days of challenging activities in the wilderness to elementary age students, junior high leaders, high school counselors, and university interns. An associated private school offers up to 20 students, ages 3-10, an alternative to traditional public and private schools. Both programs derive significant benefits from multi-age, experiential learning in the outdoors. The multi-age setting heightens everyone's awareness of individual differences and the necessity for cooperation and mutualism. It maximizes the opportunity to develop leadership and interpersonal skills alongside peers of different ages to become assistant teachers who model appropriate behaviors and desired learning outcomes for younger students. In passing on important lessons in trust, responsibility, compassion, and conflict resolution, students develop self-confidence and empathy. Perceptions of failure are diminished because of a learning climate that embraces student diversity and individual as well as group accomplishment. Having shared common adventures, students remember the team. In this way, students develop an identity with the group, within wild places, and through the adventures they have experienced together. If their experiences in and with nature are positive, filled with success and support from others, students will be more inclined to care about what happens to others and more likely to become stewards of the natural world around them. (TD)

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The Caring Capacity: A Case for Multi-age Experiential Learning

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Introduction

When traveling from village to village, the Masai elders of East Africa have a greeting that translates to, "How are the children?" The greeting suggests that with the welfare of the children go the welfare of the entire community. Our own experiences tell us that children who feel loved, appreciated, and cared for are more likely to love, appreciate, and care for others and for the environment. Children need to feel that they belong and that they have an identity within a group. They learn how to nurture through the experience of being nurtured. They learn respect for others and the environment through experiences with others in the natural environment. One of the most effective ways to instill such values is to provide opportunities for children to nurture and to be nurtured by other children and adults in an experiential environment.

For nearly 20 years we have been involved in designing multi-age, experiential outdoor learning environments for children and youth ages 3 to 18 and for university under-graduate and graduate students. Our weekly, summer adventure camp at the University of Idaho, Adventure Bound, involves four days of challenging activities, such as rock climbing, canoeing, orienteering, and ropes course activities, in wild areas within the Palouse region. Elementary-age students participate with junior high youth leaders, high school counselors, and university interns. Our school, Giant Steps, is in its eighth year of offering up to twenty students, ages 3 to 10, an alternative to traditional public and private schools. Both programs derive significant benefits from multi-age, hands-on experiences in natural environment settings. A fundamental goal of our multi-age curriculum at Giant Steps and Adventure Bound is to enable students of all ages to work, play, and learn together in an atmosphere of cooperation and mutualism.

We would like to share what we, and other teachers and researchers see as some of the benefits of the multi-age learning environment. We'll also describe some of the specifics of our experiential programs. Our long-held thesis now our heuristic is that the successful marriage of the multi-age school philosophy with outdoor, experiential education can develop environmental stewardship in children. Toward this development of environmental stewardship in our young citizens, we see as one of the imperatives of education the necessity for children to have frequent, diverse, and, above all, positive experiences in natural environments, where children feel cared for and can learn to become caring individuals.

Experiential Education

In the broadest sense, experiential learning refers to learning that is based on active doing. Because outdoor, experiential learning is inherently interest-based and child centered, and because it involves a hands-on approach, outside the confines of traditional classrooms and school buildings, students tend to be excited and enthusiastic participants. We believe that students may learn more efficiently from experiential activities. It has been said that we remember 20% of what we hear, 50% of what we see, but 80% of what we do, or, as Confucius said, "I hear and I forget, I see and I remember, I do and I understand."

Experiential education traditionally refers to a systematic use of adventure activities and other "action events" designed to change the way people feel, think, or behave (Experientia 1998). The most well known and dramatic example of an outdoor experiential program is Outward Bound,

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which serves more than 40,000 students, young and old, worldwide, each year. At Outward Bound, small groups of students are transported to the wilderness and are assigned challenging tasks, such as mastering a river rapid or hiking to a remote point. Amidst encouragement and support, students transcend perceived limits, find new strengths, gain trust, compassion, and resolve. The typical 20- to 26-day Outward Bound course includes a one- to three-day solo experience. Another course component involves a group service project in or out of wilderness, such as trail construction or maintenance, assisting elders with chores, planting trees, campsite cleanup, teaching children with special needs how to camp, or serving the homeless in a soup kitchen.

An important goal of Outward Bound is environmental stewardship. A recent Outward Bound brochure promises: "As you witness the pristine beauty and splendor of the natural environment, you learn how to care and protect this fragile resource. Instruction in Leave No Trace camping and travel skills, natural history and ecosystem preservation helps you make environmentally responsible choices in your daily life."

The Outward Bound organization, which began in Wales in 1941 and was first introduced to the United States in Colorado in 1962, has become the model for literally hundreds of wilderness experience programs. Like Outward Bound, most of these programs are designed for youth 14 years and older, but scores of others have adapted the basic concepts and activities to alternate settings and populations, including traditional school settings for elementary-age children.

The largest offshoot of Outward Bound is a program called Project Adventure, which began in Massachusetts in 1974, as an attempt to integrate experiential education activities into a school physical education curriculum. The Project Adventure model, as exemplified in several published curriculum guides and through the Project Adventure consulting organization, the largest of its kind in the world, has been implemented in hundreds of public and private schools, as well as in many higher education and camp programs. If you have ever seen or been on a rope course at a camp or school in the United States, it is almost certainly modeled in part or in whole after Project Adventure.

The so-called "ropes course" is no longer made predominately out of rope. Steel cables have replaced much of the rope. The basic idea is that people negotiate challenges built high or low above ground level among trees or utility poles, where safety is provided by spotting (for low elements) or belaying (for high elements). Challenges that involve the whole group in a problem-solving task are called group initiatives. The benefits of such activities are basically the same as those purported by Outward Bound: increased self-confidence, mutual support within a group, personal fitness, as well as familiarity and identification with the natural world. Project Adventure also introduced to experiential education the emphasis of fun, the sheer joy of using one's body, and the pleasure of sharing such experiences with others.

One of the most recent populations to benefit from experiential education, and especially from ropes course activities, is elementary age students. The original Project Adventure activities were designed for middle school students and suburban settings with access to wooded areas where ropes courses could be built and where other experiential activities, such as orienteering, could take place. The end of the seventies was building ropes course activities assembled in urban schools, in gymnasiums, and on playgrounds. But it was not until years later that early elementary age students were given opportunities to participate in experiential activities such as ropes courses.

Adventure Bound

When we began our summer day camp, Adventure Bound, in the early 1980s, there was little information on how to adapt experiential activities to children under 12. The traditional adventure model emphasized the benefit of increased confidence through the overcoming of stressful challenges. However, we soon came to understand that young children do not need additional stress in their lives in order to grow. Our role was not to impel our young students into personal growth, but to ensure that they had lots of personal choice, social interaction, and fun. We

discovered that traditional group initiatives tended to create too much peer pressure and invariably isolated some young children. We learned to minimize verbal instructions and discussion in favor of more freedom of choice, more time for physical activity, and subsequent reflection within intimate, small group.

Some children were happiest solving the challenges as we presented them, while others sought imaginative and playful ways to participate. Still others were happiest in assuming helping and assistance roles where they would not have to reveal to others their fears or their perceived physical shortcomings. We also discovered that most students seemed to benefit from the frequent repetition of activities, such as doing an obstacle course over and over or climbing the same route on our climbing wall again and again. In time, we were able to give everyone a chance to approach the familiar, to master a skill, or to invent some new way of using it.

We believe that as children learn to associate nature with fun and adventure, their appreciation and respect for the natural environment are enhanced. This is especially true for students who are provided with opportunities for what we call attunement or acclimatization to the natural environment. We use acclimatization activities that combine centering and imagination with natural awareness through the purposeful acts of being still, silent, and attentive to the natural world. Silent group activities and solo time are facilitated to enable students to experience a heightening of sensory awareness accompanied by a feeling of calm and centeredness.

We use symbolic artwork to enhance quiet time and to promote self-reflection. As one of the concluding activities for each day of Adventure Bound, and at other times in the course of our excursions into natural settings, students use art pads and colored pencils or markers to create circle drawings called Mandalas. We teach that the Mandala is an ancient, expressive art form common to many cultures throughout the world. Our purpose is to use the Mandala to help young students to express feelings, conscious or unconscious, such as the feelings associated with risk taking or helping others at Adventure Bound. We encourage students to utilize symbolic imagery through design and abstraction and to share their mandalas with others.

Another acclimatization activity incorporates community themes within the context of building a small-group shelter in a natural setting using one large, thin, clear sheet of plastic and a little bit of twine. Students self-divide into groups of up to five children. We call these groups Kivas, a Native American word which means inner circle. Under the guidance of a counselor, each Kiva surveys a natural, wooded area, noting human impact and cleaning up any litter carelessly left by others. Kiva members then work together to design, build and use their shelter.

Students are encouraged to develop a theme for their shelter which includes a Kiva name, a special mission, and a symbol. For example, the "Eagles" may have a theme of sharing a nest and may designate a "power object" made of found feathers as their symbol. Kivas are evaluated by counselors and interns according to pre-specified criteria: 1) esprit d' corps, 2) environmental impact, 3) function of design (does it actually provide shelter?), 4) aesthetics of the design, and 5) overall care of the equipment (not ripping the plastic, for example). Inside the shelter, Kiva members eat together, work on resolving conflicts, and share Mandalas with one another. Afterwards, care is taken to dismantle the shelter and to restore the site to its original or an improved condition.

Multi-Age Learning

Perhaps our most significant discovery regarding experiential adventures for young children has been the value of multi-age programming. Multi-age learning is a much respected and well researched practice in classroom education, in spite of its limited use in today's conventional schools. The traditional one-room schoolhouse was a multi-age classroom. The modern notion of the non-graded elementary school was reintroduced in the early 1960s. In a classroom setting, the terms non-graded, ungraded, mixed-age, and multi-age all refer to groups of children in which the age range is at least two years or more. While the earliest notion of the non-graded classroom involved grouping children by ability, more contemporary mixed-age groupings are designed to

optimize the educative potential of mixed abilities within the same group.

Lilian Katz, a noted researcher of multi-age groupings, writes that, unlike children of an earlier era, today's children have fewer opportunities for socialization in multi-age settings. She notes that the differences within a group of children can be a source of rich intellectual and social benefits.

> The time that children spend in groups in schools and child care centers, particularly for preschoolers, amounts to replacing families and spontaneous neighborhood groups as contexts for child-to-child interaction for large portions of children's waking hours. More and more children are deprived of the information and models of competencies that once were available to them in natural mixed-age groups. The intention of mixed-age grouping in early childhood settings is to increase the heterogeneity of the group so as to capitalize on the differences in the experience, knowledge, and abilities of the children (Katz 1995).

Several related categories of social competencies have been linked through research to the benefits of multi-age classrooms, including increased prosocial behaviors such as nurturing others, sharing and cooperation, inclusion and friendship behaviors, and leadership.

Nurturing

One of the most important benefits of multi-age groupings is the opportunity to learn nurturing behaviors. Young children who are nurtured through encouragement, comfort, and support by older peers are able to emulate these behaviors when they themselves become the elders in a group. Social competence develops for younger children as they observe and emulate the behavior of older classmates, who in turn grow in their role as nurturers and teachers (Katz 1995).

When the classroom is viewed as a "family," the roles of nurturing and commitment on the part of students, teachers, and parents are expanded. Consistency over time in these relationships enables greater depth in the children's overall development (Marshak 1994).

Sharing and Cooperation

Sharing, mutualism, and other cooperative behaviors and attitudes are enhanced in multi-age settings. A climate of expected cooperation is created as older students see younger children in need of their help and support, and younger students perceive their older peers as sources of support. These perceptions are mutually reinforcing and beneficial to both students and their teachers by providing classrooms with additional sources of giving (Katz 1995).

Help-giving and sharing behaviors are more frequent in multi-age groups. Mixed-age groups were shown to be better at taking turns than single-age groups, and to exhibit greater social responsibility and sensitivity to others (Chase & Doan 1994).

Friendships and Inclusion

Multi-age settings provide opportunities for a wider range competencies and potential friendships. As children observe and imitate their peers, they may seek companions with similar interests, or friends who complement or supplement their interests in different ways (Katz 1995).

Multi-age grouping is good for special needs children since it creates a classroom where individual differences are more likely to be accepted and, more importantly, are expected and celebrated. The opportunities for successful integration into the classroom increases as roles are found to suit the strengths of special needs children (Clark 1996). Further, multi-age groups can provide a tolerant and therapeutic environment for children who are socially immature. Younger children tend to be more accepting of an older immature or unsophisticated child than that child's same-age peers (Katz, Evangelou, & Hartman 1990).

Leadership

When asked to make decisions regarding a group task, mixed age groups were able to reach consensus with more organization and leadership behavior than students in same-age groups. When the same students were placed in same-age groups and asked to complete identical tasks, there tended to be more bullying behavior (Chase & Doan 1994).

In multi-age groups, younger children are able to participate in and contribute to complex activities set up by older peers. Research showed that older students became better at following rules when they were asked to remind younger students what the rules were (Katz 1995).

The Role of the Teacher

Multi-age settings can provide a context in which to help children gain a perspective on their own progress and a sense of continuity in their development as learners. As children are encouraged to see less mature students as developing as they themselves have passed through stages of learning, they tend to be more empathetic, supportive and inclusive in group behavior. Fewer children are isolated or rejected by their peers. Children seem more willing to watch out for one another, to include a less popular child in play, and to ask one another for assistance with problems (McClellan & Kinsey 1996).

Thoughtful facilitation by the teacher is critical to a well-run mixed age, mixed-ability cooperative learning environment. In an article in the educational research journal Phi Delta Kappan, entitled "Why We Should Care about Caring," Joan Lipsitz described some of the ways teachers can enhance multi-age learning:.

> Teachers can encourage older children to take responsibility for younger students in general or for an individual younger child. They can encourage older children not to gloat over their superior skills, but to take satisfaction in their competence in reading to younger children, in writing things down for them, in explaining things, in showing them how to use the computer, in helping them find something, in helping them get dressed to go outdoors, and so forth. Teachers can help younger children learn to accept their own limitations and their place in the total scheme of things, as well as to encourage older children to think of roles and suitable levels that younger ones could take in their work or in their activities. The basic expectation is that the children will become caring and respectful of one another (Lipsitz 1995).

Bound by Adventure

The guiding principles by which we at Adventure Bound and Giant Steps govern our students and by which students self govern are four: We teach respect for oneself, respect for others, respect for the equipment, and respect for the environment. These are essentially the principles that Maria Montessori and others have espoused for the hands-on school environment. We've adapted these principles to outdoor adventure settings. Respect for oneself not only includes self esteem but self-safety. Respect for others entails recognition of the feelings of others as well as concern for their safety.

We call our outdoor program Adventure Bound to suggest the metaphor that we are bound together by our adventures. Whether we do activities as a whole team, as in our large circle activities, or in small groups, during service projects, orienteering, and canoeing, or essentially alone, as in crossing a high bridge 40' up in the trees on our ropes course, we are bound together by our interdependence, in helping to read the map, steering the canoe, or belaying the safety rope. We need each other's support, just as sailors on a ship must cooperate lest the whole ship be lost. We are also bound together by our shared experiences, our feelings of fear, exhilaration, frustration, and accomplishment. We share the same vessel and the same common goal, but each of us have different talents, strengths, and weaknesses.

The multi-age setting heightens everyone's awareness of individual differences and the necessity for cooperation and mutualism. It maximizes the opportunity for everyone to feel successful in their own unique way. At its best, it gives all students the opportunity to develop leadership and interpersonal skills alongside peers of different ages, to become assistant teachers who model appropriate behaviors and desired learning outcomes for younger students. In passing on important lessons in trust, responsibility, compassion, and conflict resolution, students develop self-confidence and empathy. Perceptions of failure are diminished because of a learning climate which embraces student diversity and individual as well as group accomplishment.

Having shared common adventures, students are obligated to remember the team, throughout Adventure Bound, Giant Steps, and beyond. In this way, students develop an identity with the group, within wild places, and through the adventures they have experienced together. If their experiences in and with nature are positive, filled with success and support from others, students will be more inclined to care about what happens to others and are more likely to become stewards of the natural world around them.

A goal of modern education should be help learners feel cared for and to teach caring. Cecile Andrews writes in her book on building community called The Simplicity Circle:

> ....we live in a cold, unsupportive society, where few people experience the support and caring they need. Instead of developing our true selves, we develop false selves and artificial images. The judgmental, competitive atmosphere of our education system undermines our confidence and belief in ourselves. To live life fully, we need authenticity, we need support and caring (Andrews 1994).

Support and caring, for all children, should be the guiding principle of our system of education. Taking care of our planetary ecosystem must begin with taking care of our children.

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